

Resiliency

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Healthy Strategies for Uncertain Times

How to protect your mental health in times of distressing news

Daily, we're subject to a constant stream of challenging news headlines and social media posts – pandemics, strikes, economic instability, political conflict, and natural disasters are all concerning events that will inevitably occupy our thoughts and even influence our behaviours. Sometimes, we're not even sure how to react.

What is clear, however, is that bad news can be very distressing for us as we attempt to process everything. It's a question of just how we manage to deal with the news that will impact our mental health for better or worse.

In uncertain times, our anxious minds can gravitate towards the worst-case scenario, and while it's easy to feel confused and powerless in the face of bad news, there are strategies you can adopt to maintain your mental health. These tips will help you remain resilient in the face of distressing news.

Limit Your Information Intake

It's normal to feel stress when we receive bad news – something like a pandemic is new to everyone, so typically we are going to feel more anxious about it. However, if the amount of information and news we consume is negatively impacting our mental health, then it's time to step back and ask ourselves where we're getting our information from – and whether it's all necessary information (such as an official government announcement) versus everything else. It's also important to know what news sources you're getting information from; try to limit the amount of time you're spending reading everything.

"I caution against reading every single post and article in search of answers and certainties," says Dr. Katelyn Gomes, a clinical psychologist with MindBeacon. Seeking out information is a useful thing, but when there's too much information, it can feel overwhelming and cause anxiety and panic.

Of course, some of us may be tempted to take a different tack altogether and simply ignore everything – the 'head in the sand' approach, which isn't necessarily a healthy option either; Keep in mind that there's always a continuum between ignoring the problem and concentrating on it because you're anxious.

Ideally, we want to locate the sweet spot between recognizing uncertain times, and working on those emotions, rather than fuel our anxiety through overexposure.

Understand Our Negativity Bias and How It Works

If you've ever wondered why bad news seems to grab your attention more than neutral or good news, it's not that there's simply more bad news out there; our brains are actually more sensitive to unpleasant news – something called the Negativity Bias

It's helpful to notice how anxiety can pull some of us towards negative information. If you're pulled into a negativity bias, when negative things like bad news can have a stronger effect on our mental wellbeing, try instead to pull yourself towards the neutral or the positive.

"If you know that you're predisposed to anxiety, it helps to recognize the patterns," adds Gomes. "It's okay to worry, but we don't want to be consumed by worry."

Prioritize Calming, Healthy Activities

Often when we encounter stressful news that takes a toll on our mental wellbeing, it's our physical wellbeing that's soon neglected. By doing so, we're forgetting the crucial relationship between our mind and our body – and the positive impact that physical health can have on our stress levels. Effectively, when we're feeling overwhelmed and panicked, we're not making the best choices.

With that insight in mind, it's helpful to find something to help you calm down a little bit – meditation, yoga, going for a walk. It also helps to maintain a healthy lifestyle in terms of your nutrition – exercise and healthy eating are things we tend to throw out the window when our stress takes over.

Maintain Your Social Connections

We're social creatures, that's a given. And so especially in times of distress, it's important to maintain connections with our friends, family, and co-workers.

Social connections are part of a healthy lifestyle, so even when we're feeling overwhelmed with bad news, it's still important to maintain them. If we take the isolation and social distancing around the virus pandemic as an example, it's an opportunity to connect with others online or over the phone instead, and use that time to talk about what you'd normally talk about, the positive or neutral things, while limiting how much you talk about these stress-inducing issues.

Distressing news is never an easy thing to live through, especially in an era when information comes at us so quickly. It's easy to feel overwhelmed and anxious, but with patience, support, and self-awareness, it's also possible to maintain your mental health. In trying times, it's our resiliency that gets us through after all – it's just how well we nurture that resiliency that really matters.

Understanding Stress and Resiliency: The Human Stress Response

At its most basic level, stress is a response to change.

Some stress can be a good thing. When you walk up the stairs instead of taking the elevator, for example, you “stress” your leg muscles – and when they recover they will be a little stronger. Your leg muscles become more resilient because they were stressed.

Similarly, within a normal range, struggling and successfully learning how to cope helps us get a little stronger mentally. In fact, humans don't tend to do very well in stress-free, happy, Utopian environments. They get bored and depressed and things start getting weird.

Taking a stress-free vacation is great, but you don't really want to live a “stress free” life. That may be hard to believe right now but it's true.

Living a life without stress would be like being an astronaut living in zero gravity for too long. Without the “stress” of gravity, muscles atrophy and things start to fall apart. We need some stress in our lives in order to learn, grow and thrive – a fact that happiness experts point to as the whole point of living.

Successfully coping with stress makes us more psychologically resilient. It's that simple.

Of course, the opposite is also true. More stress doesn't necessarily make you stronger. Overwhelming stress is... well, overwhelming. Too much stress for too long and things start to fall apart.

Evolving to deal with stress

For millions of years, humans and our remote ancestors have been engaged in a struggle to survive and adapt in an ever-changing environment. Through the process of natural selection, our bodies have been equipped with a system for maximizing arousal and creating the energy we need to survive "life or death" situations. This included physical dangers like hunting dangerous animals, escaping predators that wanted to eat us and dealing with other humans who wanted to do us harm.

Remember that any changes in the environment around us, by definition, produce "stress." But the kinds of changes that produce the most stress are those that are novel, unpredictable, uncertain, threatening or dangerous. COVID-19 and all of the other changes that go with it a very stressful situation for most people.

Fight, Flight & Freeze

The *FIGHT, FLIGHT & FREEZE* response is how our bodies respond to any changes in the environment that we perceive as threatening or dangerous.

For most of evolution, when people perceived danger, their bodies automatically produced a surge of energy, putting them in fight or flight mode, and allowing them to do whatever they needed to do to survive. So, today, if we feel threatened, our *FIGHT, FLIGHT & FREEZE* system gets activated.

When the *FIGHT, FLIGHT & FREEZE* response gets activated, a hormone (ACTH) is released from the brain into the bloodstream. It sends signals to the adrenal glands to circulate cortisol and other hormones. One of these hormones, adrenaline, makes the heart beat faster, increases blood pressure, expands lung capacity and improves muscle strength.

Every other part of the body – now under the control of the sympathetic nervous system – responds by directing energy to the vital organs and preparing you for exertion. That means that your entire body is "switched on." It's in a high state of arousal and ready to do whatever it needs to do to survive.

But...

Unfortunately for us, the stress response hasn't changed much in the past 200,000 years. While we rarely need to fight or run to keep ourselves and our families alive, we still have the same primitive response to danger that our ancestors had.

The stress response works very well when we're faced with short, intense, life-or-death situations. It also works well when we escape the situation and reach "safety," when stress hormone levels can quickly return to normal levels.

It's good that we have a *FIGHT, FLIGHT & FREEZE* response and, once in a while, it comes in handy in modern life.

Unlike COVID-19 most of the stressors that we face in normal daily life are not "life or death" – even though our bodies may still react as if we're in that kind of danger.

For example... avoid bears.

For example, while some of us may still be unlucky enough to meet a grizzly bear or a tiger in the forest, it's a little more likely that a threat will come in the form of an intruder in our house or a car not stopping for a red light. If either of those ever did happen, you would definitely want that stress response to kick in.

But, in other situations, the *FIGHT, FLIGHT & FREEZE* response doesn't help at all. For example, if you're practicing physical distancing, working from home, looking after children or elderly parents and stressed about finances and the future, it doesn't help if your body is reacting as if it's "life or death."

A little fear is motivating but too much is disabling.

In modern life, the stressors we face are more chronic and complex. We now face the stress of COVID-19 on an ongoing basis: Too much change too fast, too much feeling out of control, too many demands and not enough time to meet them, unrealistic expectations that we place on ourselves and others, and difficulties balancing our work, family and personal lives.

The stress response – which is so adaptive and helpful under some conditions – may become maladaptive if we experience an ongoing, chronic stress like COVID-19. In other words, it can start to work against us.

Too much of a good thing...

The human body just wasn't designed to withstand the physiological effects of being in a constant state of *FIGHT, FLIGHT & FREEZE*.

After a while, the hormones that are so helpful in the short-term begin to have negative effects. Our body aren't meant to stay "switched on" in a high state of arousal for any length of time. In fact, if the body stays too revved-up for too long, systems can begin to break down.

This breakdown starts with low-level symptoms, such as the occasional headache or sleepless night, tension and aches, or an increased frequency of colds and flus. But, if stress continues, it may lead to chronic physical and/or psychological illness.

Ways to Reduce Stress

Practice the Relaxation Response

Because chronic hyperarousal is such a common symptom of stress, one of the most important things we can do is introduce you to a variety of techniques for accessing the "relaxation response" to bring your body down to a lower level of arousal.

Whether it's a daily practice of controlled breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, yoga or mindfulness meditation, learning to access the relaxation response will help you reduce hyper-arousal and move away from the stress response when it gets activated. It can be as simple as taking a few minutes once or twice a day to breathe.

Practice Taking Perspective

We know that change and uncertainty produce stress. And, we know that changes that we perceive as threatening trigger the *FIGHT, FLIGHT & FREEZE* response.

We also know that if we're exposed to an environment we perceive to be threatening for too long then our stress response can become part of the problem instead of a solution.

So, if we want to build resiliency, we need to understand the central role that our biases, expectations, perceptions, appraisals and interpretations play in our response to events. When faced with change and uncertainty, our expectations, perceptions and how we measure our ability to cope will determine how we respond.

For example, a demand on our time might only be stressful if we didn't expect it – if we think we don't have enough time to complete the task, don't know how to complete it, or if we interpret the request for our time as manipulative, cruel or thoughtless.

In other words, it's our interpretation of the situation and our perception of our ability to cope with it that determines the amount of stress we feel in response to it.

Because our perceptions, interpretations and expectations are so important when it comes to determining the amount of stress we feel, another thing that we will introduce you to are techniques that will help you cope with change and uncertainty, and allow you to better identify and challenge your biases, assumptions, interpretations and expectations.

Manage Relationship Stress

People are social animals. On our own in the wild, people were vulnerable. So, over the course of our evolution, people have learned to live in groups in order to be safe. Living and working in social groups is a source of great comfort and support.

However, relationships are also a source of change, uncertainty, tension, perception of threat and potential conflict. COVID-19 may cause some stress in your relationships, so we will spend some time introducing you to techniques for thinking about, and behaving differently, in relationships.

Connect with others

Given that we are social animals, we have a deep need for meaningful connections with family, friends and our community. Relationships can be stressful, but they also give great comfort and support.

As a result of COVID-19, you may find yourself isolated from family, friends and community. Loneliness can be particularly hard, because those social connections help to buffer stress. Sure, a friend, roommate or partner can stress you out, but they can also help you de-stress by sharing a meal, laugh or hug at the end of the day.

The opposite is also true. Social isolation is very stressful. That's why solitary confinement is often described as "cruel and unusual punishment." In North America, the "loneliness epidemic" has been identified as a major public health problem, especially among men. We all need actively challenge the forces in our lives that promote loneliness and isolation at the best of times. During COVID-19 we have to be especially careful to make the time and effort to maintain our connection to other people.

Connect with meaning

People are better protected from stress and are more resilient when they make decisions and live their lives according to their core values.

In a social media world, we're constantly bombarded by other people's agendas, expectations and values. There are a lot of people out there telling what you "should" value, how you "should" behave and who you "should" be.

That's a lot of noise that we want you to practice stepping away from.

Your core values are the compass that keeps you on course and leading the life you want to lead, especially during stressful times like these. We encourage you to identify what's important to you and check your compass regularly. We can help with that, too.

Make a commitment to mental fitness

To get physically fit, you have to do exercises that challenge your muscles and cardiovascular system so that you can build strength, flexibility and endurance.

And, when you exercise, you also re-wire connections between your muscles and your brain. That's especially true when you get in shape by playing a sport. Then, you really start to change the connections in your brain as you learn new skills. It's easier to get motivated to get more fit when you have the goal of competing in a race, making a team or improving your game.

It's the same with mental fitness and resiliency.

It's easier to get motivated to get more mentally fit when you're aiming to be more connected to your work, family, friends, partner, hobbies, leisure, community and the greater meaning and purpose in your life.

Spoiler Alert! Resiliency is about being able to connect to "The Big Picture," even when you're really stressed, **like maybe right now.**

But, eventually, most people find that they start getting bored with the gym. The gym is crowded in January when people commit to physical fitness. But, by the time March rolls around...

The "secrets" to a sustainable commitment to mental fitness and physical fitness are the same:

- Make a long-term, value-based commitment to your health. No one can do it for you, and you're worth it.
- Even a little moderate exercise is very good for you – a little bit done over the long haul goes a long way. You don't need to radically change everything in your life all at once.
- Set reasonable and reachable goals, even if it's committing to practice one exercise at a time, over time. Fifty years of stress management research tells us that building resiliency is a long-term project. Building mental fitness consists of setting a few reasonable and reachable goals and then working towards those goals in small steps. You get there slowly by building one skill and one good habit at a time.
- Expect that your motivation will go up and go down. Congratulations, you're human!
- Mix it up. It's okay to cycle through techniques to keep it fresh.
- Don't forget to stretch! When it comes to mental fitness, it's about accessing the relaxation response and practicing mindfulness.

- Make a social commitment. Declare your commitment to wellness. Let people know that you're working on mental fitness and why.

Remember, mental fitness is like physical fitness. You can't possibly do it all at once. Pick something to work on, such as meditating once a day, and try it for a while. Take the time to set reasonable and reachable goals and work towards them in small steps.